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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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REVIEW ESSAYS/ NOTES CRITIQUES

The Anatomy of Work: A Review Essay

Craig Heron

Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1979).
Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books 1979).
Richard M. Pfeffer, *Working For Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press 1979).
Andrew Zimbalist, ed., *Case Studies on the Labor Process* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1979).

WORKING LIFE WITHIN ADVANCED capitalist society has seldom been explored with more vigour than in the past decade. The state's concern about rising levels of working-class militancy has prompted some of the new writing on capitalist work relations, but many of the new books have flowed from the pens of writers on the left who have rediscovered, after a century of neglect, the analytical insights into the capitalist labour process provided in Volume I of *Capital*. As a result, increasingly complex questions are now being raised about the nature of work in the twentieth century. Not content with simply dissecting actual work processes and tracing their historical evolution, writers have deen confronting the implications of work process and work relations for a whole social order — and , of course, for the possibilities of changing it.

The late Harry Braverman paved the way for much of this new literature with his compelling and insightful book, *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*. Braverman's major contribution was to outline how the managerial and technological innovations of the early twentieth century fundamentally reshaped and degraded the work experience in the United States and brought about a major shift of power towards the owners and managers of monopoly capitalist industry. His writing drew attention to the real forces behind what is so often seen as

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impersonal technological determinism.

While taking Braverman as a reference point, more recent work has suggested that the workplace transformation he chronicled was not simply the result of managerial initiatives. The process was much more conflict-ridden, as both managers and workers struggled to assert some control over the labour process. Four new books in particular take up many of the questions about the nature of work in a more detailed, nuanced fashion. Authored by an economist, a political scientist, a sociologist, and a collection of varied social scientists, these studies include a historical dimension, but are clearly aimed at explaining working-class life in North America since World War II, especially in the 1970s. They are all based on American evidence, but students of the Canadian working class will find plenty between these covers to help them understand the experience of Canadian workers.

The study with the most ambitious scope is Richard Edwards' *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century*. Instead of the omnipotent force of managerial ideology and practice, Edwards emphasizes the conflict inherent in capitalist industry which regularly pits workers against their bosses over the amount of work to be done each day ("a fair day's work for a fair day's pay"). "On the one side," he argues, "the workers use hidden or open resistance to protect themselves against the constant pressure for speed-up; on the other side, capitalists employ a variety of sophisticated or brutal devices for tipping the balance their way." In contrast to Braverman, he relates how management initiatives in the early twentieth century were often responses to the surging power of craft and industrial unionism and to the challenge of political radicalism. He then proceeds to isolate three types of workplace control which managers developed in their struggles with their workers: simple (direct, authoritarian supervision), technical (installing pre-paced machinery to eliminate workers' own initiative on the job), and bureaucratic (structuring employers' control in rigid rules and regulations which establish a "rule of law" within the workplace). The evolution of three distinct labour markets in the modern American economy is then linked, highly schematically, to the three modes of workplace control, to explain the differences between various job experiences and the "fractionalization" of the American working class which has resulted.

Generalizing about industrial transformation requires a thorough understanding of the unevenness and lags in various sectors, and Edwards would have benefited from exposure to some of the detailed studies presented in *Case Studies in the Labor Process*, edited by Andrew Zimbalist. These 14 essays were drawn together as microstudies apparently in support of Braverman's thesis of ultimate degradation of work, and Zimbalist's introduction is a vigorous, if gloomy, defence of that perspective. Like so many collections of essays, this one is a mixed plate of rich delights and insubstantial morsels, but the majority are rigorous, thoughtful discussions of the specific dynamics of the industry under consideration. Particularly noteworthy are the pieces by David Noble on machine-shop work, Michael Yarrow and Keith Dix on coal mining, Bob Reckman on carpenters, and Herb Mills on longshoremen. Some of the essays cling to the Braverman emphasis on the managerial imperative, but several others implicitly or overtly challenge that one-sided approach with an emphasis on worker resistance — especially Noble on machinists and Yarrow on miners. The debate is not resolved in the book, but the wealth of detailed analysis on specific work processes and workplace relations will certainly help further theorizing.

Two book-length studies have also appeared, both by men who, like academics and journalists half a century ago, "put on overalls to find out what was

on the workers' mind." The less successful of the two is Richard Pfeffer's *Working for Capitalism*, a rambling existential journey through a Baltimore factory and along a shelf of recent books on work (from Studs Terkel to Braverman). In this "personal statement," both his seven-month stint as a fork-truck operator and his immerson in this unfamiliar literature (both prompted by an attack of middle-class guilt after a trip to China in 1972) are approached with a naive, wide-eyed sense of wonder, incredulity, and outrage. The book contains, in roughly equal portions, reflections on his job, on his frustrating interaction with the union in the plant, and on the books he read. It could have been subtitled "The New Left Finds the Working Class," except Pfeffer seldom tells us much about the workers he encountered on the job. Scattered through a stream of trite observations (for example, "The vast majority of workers with whom I had contact felt negatively about their jobs." [79]) are some interesting comments on the rhythms of work in his factory and on the role of the union, but generally he is too preoccupied with the reactions of a middle-class radical to an unfamiliar blue-collar environment.

Michael Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism* is a vastly more sophisticated and more stimulating case study, which attempts to link the specifics of his observations to larger theories of work relations. After finding a job as a machine operator in a South Chicago plant of the "Allied" machinery corporation, Burawoy discovered that he had stumbled into the same shop in which Donald Roy had done his famous experiment in participant observation 30 years earlier. Burawoy was thus able to make some interesting comparisons and to provide a historical dimension which his study would otherwise have lacked. Rejecting Braverman's central concern with the separation of conception and execution as the hub of managerial control, Burawoy was interested in the ways in which workers' ability to work was actually transformed into surplus-producing labour and what role their consciousness played in that process. How did workers acquiesence in their own exploitation? Or, in the Gramscian idiom, what generated workers' "consent" to their bosses' pursuit of profit?

Economic coercion is an inadequate answer, he argues, since the rise of industrial unionism has brought more secure employment in recent years. For Burawoy, consent is a slippery concept which he uses to explain everything from "Why . . . workers work as hard as they do?" to why "workers do not constitute themselves as a class whose interests are irreconcilable with capital?" He understands it not as simply subjective consciousness but as some kind of subconscious adaptation which "is expressed through, and is the result of, the organization of activities." In the modern labour process activities are organized "as though they present the worker with real choices, however narrowly confined these choices might be." Consent comes from "participation in choosing." (27) The book offers as proof of the widening choices the game-playing involved in machine-shop piecework and the growth of an internal labour market, where the firm's jobs are made available first to its employees. He tells us little about such celebrated forms of worker protest as absenteeism, labour turnover, wildcat strikes, and the like, and the "shop-floor culture" which he claims to have found is therefore not explosive, subversive, or protorevolutionary, as some recent students of production workers have suggested. Instead, he argues, the workers' on-the-job behaviour more fully integrates them into a system of capitalist control, that is, into the "securing and obscuring of surplus value." Although he writes solidly within a Marxist framework (with a strong dose of Althusserian structuralism and a pinch of critical theory),

his deeply pessimistic analysis of American working-class life suggests long-term stability and quiescence

Central to all these studies is a concern with the mechanisms of control within the workplace and the habituation of workers to capitalist hegemony in modern America. And most of them try to find answers within the work process and work relations themselves. Those in the Braverman mould emphasize how managers have swept all before them with deskilling, especially mechanization and sub-division of labour. Edwards would have us focus instead on the fragmentation of the working class that has resulted from differential control systems in different work situations — the segmented labour market, which "distorted and blunted class opposition to capitalism, making for a weak socialist movement and a long period of relative stability within the regime of monopoly capitalism." In order to establish such an argument, he conjures up a mythically "homogeneous" nineteenth-century working class — a phenomenon which will come as quite a surprise to anyone familiar with the multitudinous divisions and rankings in the nineteenth-century work force and with the complex tensions between craftsmen and less skilled men and women caught in the first wave of the Industrial Revolution. It could well be argued that, as a result of subsequent mechanization and deskilling, the North American working class of the 1970s is a good deal less fragmented on the job than it was a century ago. His attempts to link the labour market segmentation to specific, sequential control systems are also awkward and ahistorical: surely "technical control" had arrived in the textile industry well before 1900, and North America's railway corporations had introduced "bureaucratic control" in the 1850s, long before the great change Edwards would have us see in the 1940s. Finally his groupings of workers into the respective labour markets is fraught with problems. Can craft workers, salesmen, doctors, and research scientists really be said to share any meaningful labour market characteristics? In sorting the workers into his three slots, moreover, he manages to contradict himself by assigning mass-production workers to the second labour market category, characterized by technical control, after citing this group earlier in the book as subject to bureaucratic control. We have not heard the last word on labour-market segmentation theories, but Edwards does not present a convincing case that they are crucial to explaining modern working-class consciousness.

Both Edwards and Burawoy also emphasize the importance of the bureaucratization of work relations. Edwards uses his phrase "bureaucratic control" to denote a system of work wherein management's hegemony is disguised in a complex web of rules, regulations, job definitions, job ladders, and the like. Burawoy uses the twin terms "internal labour market" and "internal state" for essentially the same bureaucratic configuration. The creation of minutely differentiated jobs and a widely established policy of recruiting for those positions from within the firm's work force, along with seniority systems and pension plans, has tied workers more securely to their employers, promoted common interests between capital and labour, disguised class conflict through apparently impersonal rules, and generated individualized competition and conflict among the workers themselves. In contrast to his discussion of turn-of-the-century managerial developments, Edwards pays scant attention to the rise of the CIO and the often violent struggles which workers waged in the 1930s and the 1940s to compel their reluctant employers to accept this bureaucratic regulation of the workplace and to abandon the deeply resented personal tyranny of lower-level management. Some of the most important incidents of class struggle in the past half century and decisive re-adjustment of power relations within large-scale industry by 1945 cannot be so easily over-

looked. In fact, Edwards is extremely vague about the timing and conditions for this transition from technical to bureaucratic control, and his prime example of the bureaucratically controlled firm is far from typical — Kodak, a non-union workplace.

Burawoy does not succumb to this egregious analytical error but does view the union as a predominantly conservatizing force, whose contractual agreements with the company, grievance procedures, and so on bring the rights of "industrial citizenship" but also the responsibilities to conform to negotiated rules — a view of the union as policeman which echoes Stanley Aronowitz's position in *False Promises* (and is repeated at length in Richard Pfeffer's book).

Edward's neglect and Burawoy's cynicism reflect an often justified disillusionment with the AFL-CIO since World War II. Writers like Burawoy will admit that unions have provided workers with some collective strength to constrain management and despite regular complaints, are consistently supported by workers as necessary institutional bulwarks; yet they all too quickly sweep aside this ambivalence and conclude that unions are (perhaps only can be?) integrating and conservatizing forces, rather than real forces of opposition or resistance. The picture is surely not that clear — certainly not in Canada. Burawoy's contention that the internal labour market, governed by seniority systems, promotes individualistic competition between workers overlooks the fact that this whole system is buttressed by the workers' collective power through their union. Is this system more individualistic than in the pre-union era, when favouritism and sycophancy were the norm in the internal hiring process? By choosing 1945 as his point of comparison, that is, after the union had arrived in the firm, Burawoy cannot answer this question. The industrial unionism which was consolidated in the 1930s and 1940s in North America was undeniably tamed in its infancy, but to see it thoroughly transformed into a tool of management or, at best, into a mere structural component of capitalist control, is to eliminate far too many tensions created by regular rank-and-file pressures, especially in the past 15 years. The phenomenon of bureaucratized work relations which accompanied mass unionization still awaits a more balanced treatment.

Burawoy, however, does not see consent "manufactured" solely through the new bureaucratic structures of the internal state. His most stimulating argument uses the tools of industrial sociology and his own shop-floor observations to present the piecework labour process as a series of games, whose rules, he believes, workers accept by participating. As a machine operator, he noted how he and his workmates were consumed with "making out," that is, working hard to achieve levels of production that would earn incentive pay (though never over 140 per cent of the quota; restriction of output survived informally). He found that these games promoted individualism and conflict with any auxiliary workers who hindered "making out," rather than with management, Although playing the game would typically involve various subversions of the managerial organization of work, Burawoy rejects the conclusion of a variety of industrial sociologists who have viewed these practices as an oppositional culture on the shop floor; he argues instead that game playing is in fact often tolerated and facilitated by lower-level management. Games, he claims, are played "within limits defined by minimum wages and acceptable profit margins." (80) Thus, participation in the game of "making out," and acceptance of its rules (which involves producing the company's profits) habituates workers to working hard for the company and generates consent.

Game-playing is certainly a compelling metaphor. Burawoy is not the first sociologist to note the role of games in workers' shop-floor behaviour, and many

of us have no doubt seen how play helps to relieve the tedium of a job. Yet he wants us to accept that games are much more than simply compensations for unsatisfactory work and that they are crucial in masking from workers how their feverish activity is producing the company's profits. The crux of his argument is the equation participation equals consent: workers become so absorbed in the sport of "making out" that they lose sight of the larger relationships between capital and labour. Does this form of adaptation to oppressive work really obliterate all other consciousness? Unfortunately Burawoy describes the "game-playing" in fascinating detail but offers no proof, from his observations, that it is this behaviour which constrains them. The metaphor of a game in which participants consent to the rules actually breaks down over the essential question of choice: workers may choose to play baseball or hockey or checkers out of the pleasure they derive from particular games, but coming to work every day is a matter of undisputed necessity — they need their wages for survival. Burawoy is far too quick to dismiss the coercive framework of his "games." By the end of the book, one is tempted to ask what else he thought workers might do.

Crucial to his argument is the contention that, regardless of their previous or ongoing experience off the job, all workers succumb to "making out" at work — that is, that the organization of production, not family, church, school, and so on, is responsible for producing the almost subliminal, acquiescent consciousness he calls consent. To prove this "autonomy of the labour process," he studied the output of his 185 workmates and through regression analysis tested variations in production output resulting from seniority, experience, race, age, marital status, and education. The minor variations he discovered led him to admit that "Consciousness molded in practices outside the factory do affect, although within narrow limits, the way operators respond to production relations" (152) and to postulate, more cautiously, the *relative* autonomy of the labour process. This concession seems to do serious damage to what he has already argued. Since one of the clearest distinctions he found, for example, was between young and old workers, how would his theory of game-playing incorporate the youth culture which so many industrial relations studies have found influencing the behaviour of young workers over the past 15 years? Even more important, his sample of workers included so few women that he could not test male-female differences. Surely any consideration of game-playing, whether on the shop floor or on the gridiron, must come to terms with the machismo of male working-class sportsmanship, learned outside the plant in school yards and back lots throughout working-class neighbourhoods. The studies of women pieceworkers in the Zimbalist collection report none of the pride in physical prowess that Burawoy saw among the men in his shop. (He indicates, in fact, that he was not fully accepted into the social life of the shop until he proved himself by "making out" with the best of them.)

In the end one must wonder just how "relatively" autonomous the workplace really is. Both Edwards and Burawoy argue that the organization of work has independent (and ultimately determinant) dynamics in shaping working-class consciousness, especially in breaking up their class solidarity and in promoting acquiescence in capitalist control of their work and social existence in general. In both cases these writers present persuasive arguments about the importance of on-the-job experience which have for too long been ignored. The labour process *should* be the point of departure for studies of the working class. But in their efforts to minimize consciousness generated outside the workplace, they leave an unbalanced picture of working-class life

in North America. Where are we to place such crucial changes in the working-class lifestyle as the post-war disintegration of tight-knit working-class neighbourhoods brought about by the spread of the automobile and the growth of socially heterogeneous suburbs? At the tail end of his book Edwards belatedly hints at the similarly complicating factors of racism and sexism in workers' consciousness, but fails to integrate them adequately into his main argument. Questions about the relationship of ideology and politics to the workplace are similarly neglected in these studies. Near the beginning of his book Burawoy mentions his fellow workers' theories of profit as "some form of earned reward for past services or the risk of capital investment" (29), but he never asks where these ideas come from. The absence of radical ideological perspectives within so much of the North American working class, which might have offered a different view of profit-making (as they did, for example, in 1886 and 1919) and which the Cold War so effectively attacked in the United States, helps to explain workers' "consent" but finds no place in the enclosed models of these writers. Surely for most workers there appears to be no alternative to capitalism, and "making out" in the factory may be the best way of earning a little extra and taking a little pride in an otherwise uninspiring job, in a society which seems to offer little more.

These criticisms of Michael Burawoy's work should not be interpreted as outright rejection of his book. I am not persuaded by some of his arguments, and I doubt that his observations could be easily extended to other industries. But his analysis is immensely thought provoking, with numerous brilliant flashes of insight into evolving management practice and working-class response. Whether or not he convinces the readers, he does force some careful rethinking about the nature of work in the modern factory.

The various writers discussed here do not agree on the prospects for future social change in the face of such allegedly severe constraints on working-class consciousness. Concentration on the structural conditioning of the labour process can lead to despair. Burawoy paints the bleakest picture: he sees little likelihood of radicalism, or even militance, from American workers and looks to the Third World for socialist successes. Some of the contributors to the Zimbalist collection seem implicitly as pessimistic in the face of the relentless march of capitalist managerial power. A number of these writers, along with Richard Edwards, argue for the need for a broad political movement to challenge corporate control of political options. Few of them express much faith in the American labour movement, but we might question this pessimism. A revitalized labour movement prepared to break through the iron curtain which fell down around "management prerogatives" in the post-war stabilization of collective bargaining could begin to challenge management's undisputed control of the labour process and help to put "workers' control" back on the political agenda.

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